

Lois W.



Lois W. in her wedding dress

Lois W. was born in Brooklyn, New York, on March 4, 1891. She was the eldest of six children, with two brothers and three sisters (one of whom died in infancy.) In her writings Lois recalls a loving family and a mostly very happy childhood. Her family lived in a brownstone house on Clinton Street in Brooklyn, where her father had a medical practice, and spent much time in Manchester, Vermont, where they had a summer home. Lois was educated in private schools and graduated in 1912 from the Packer Collegiate Institute. Following this, Lois studied at the New York School of Fine and Applied Art for two years, and then accepted a job at the YWCA.

In Vermont, during the summer of 1913, Lois met her future husband, Bill W., through her brother Rogers. Initially Lois was not particularly interested in Bill, as he was four years her junior, but by the end of the next year Lois had decided Bill was the most interesting, most knowledgeable, and finest man she had ever met. They spent much time sailing, hiking, talking, enjoying music and enjoying each other's company, and became secretly engaged in 1915. In 1917 Bill was a student at Norwich University, a military college in Vermont, when all academic work halted because of World War I. Bill was sent to officer's training in Plattsburg, New York, and was later commissioned a second lieutenant. Bill and Lois married on January 24, 1918. Six months later, Bill was sent overseas.

Bill was abstinent when he and Lois first met; his drinking began shortly before they were married. Lois was not initially concerned about Bill's drinking; her writings say that she felt Bill drank to be "social" and that her love would inspire Bill to resume abstinence.

Bill returned home from Europe in 1919, and tried to settle into a job and a vocation. Bill took law courses and Lois worked as an occupational therapy aide. Following completion of his law course, Bill worked at various jobs. His drinking escalated.

Lois became pregnant in the summer of 1922 with the first of three ectopic pregnancies. Lois was never able to bear children, a bitter disappointment to both Bill and Lois. Several years later, they applied to Spence-Chapin adoption agency to adopt a child, and were denied due to a report of Bill's excessive drinking that was told to the agency by a friend they had listed as a reference.

In 1925 Bill and Lois set off on a motorcycle trip to investigate and report on companies for investors. They brought a tent for sleeping and took various jobs along the way. The trip was a success, and Bill achieved subsequent business success as a stock analyst. Bill and Lois enjoyed financial security and prominent social status during the later part of the 1920's. However, Bill's escalating drinking created problems at work and at home, and eventually Lois by necessity had to find jobs to support her and Bill. In 1930 she completed a course at the New York School of Interior Decorating, which lead to work at Macy's and later at Loeser's department store.



Lois often drove!

Bill's progressive drinking eventually destroyed his career, damaged his relationships and his health, and brought him to the brink of insanity and death. As Bill checked into and out of sanitariums, Lois was advised that Bill would soon either die or require permanent institutionalization. Lois tried desperately to help but found herself powerless to "fix" what was wrong. Her diary entries during Bill's heaviest drinking years reflected despair mingled with a refusal to abandon hope for the man she loved and the life she hoped for.

Bill finally achieved sobriety in 1934, through a life-changing spiritual experience. In 1935, Bill met Dr. Bob S., and Alcoholics Anonymous came to be. Through subsequent years, as Bill threw himself into his A.A. work and often filled their Brooklyn home with alcoholics, Lois tried to support her husband's work with alcoholics while working at various jobs to support her and Bill. Lois became frustrated, unhappy, and full of self pity, hurt pride, and resentment. Her "bottom" came when, in response to Bill's asking her if she was ready to go to a meeting with him, she threw a shoe at him and yelled, "Damn your old meetings." Lois realized that she needed help, and she made a decision to "strive for my own spiritual growth" by employing many of the principles of A.A. to change her own attitudes. Through her own emotional struggle and through witnessing other family members who were similarly impacted by alcoholism, Lois came to realize that alcoholism is a family disease and that the solution was a program for family recovery.

During the 1930's, Lois and Bill were forced by economic necessity to leave the house on Clinton Street in Brooklyn for a nomadic life, staying in temporary quarters or boarding with other families. In 1941 they were offered the opportunity to obtain a home in Bedford Hills, New York. Twenty three years after their marriage, Bill and Lois moved into the home they later named Stepping Stones - the first home they had ever owned.



Lois and Bill

In the 1940's, Bill and Lois traveled through the USA and met with many family groups as well as A.A. groups. Lois described how she practiced the spiritual principles of A.A. for her own personal benefit at many open A.A. meetings and family group gatherings. In 1951, Lois followed Bill's suggestion to unify the family groups. Lois was initially reluctant; she was 60 years old and wanted to enjoy a quiet life at Stepping Stones. Her strong sense of service prevailed, and she and her friend Anne B. moved forward to gather the scattered family groups into what would become Al-Anon.

Bill and Lois traveled extensively around the USA and abroad, until Bill's death in 1971, on the 53rd anniversary of their wedding. Lois continued her work with the growing Al-Anon fellowship; she felt she had "a purpose in life, even with Bill gone." The year after Bill's death, Lois and an Al-Anon friend traveled around the world, receiving excited welcomes from members of A.A. and Al-Anon groups everywhere. She spoke at Al-Anon and A.A. functions until she was into her 90's, including A.A. International conventions. At the age of 94, she addressed an audience of over 45,000 at the 50th Anniversary A.A. convention in Montreal, receiving a standing ovation. Lois welcomed A.A. and Al-Anon visitors to her home at Stepping Stones, and in 1979 formed the Stepping Stones foundation to maintain Stepping Stones for the benefit of A.A. and Al-Anon members. Today, the Stepping Stone Foundation continues to preserve the home and property, and share the story of hope and recovery for alcoholics, family members and friends.



Stepping Stones in Bedford Hills, New York. Tours of the home are offered by the Stepping Stones Foundation.

Lois W. died in 1988, at the age of 97. Her work with the Al-Anon Clearinghouse was instrumental in Al-Anon's growth to become the program it is today. The legacy she left through her Al-Anon work lives on and thrives. Lois worked devotedly and selflessly to carry the message of hope to those affected by alcoholism. She became a guiding light to others who suffered from the effects of a loved one's alcoholism, and to those who carry on the work of the Al-Anon program.